



DePaul University  
**Via Sapientiae**

---

Asian American Art Oral History Project

Asian American Art Oral History Project

---

Spring 6-19-2019

## Udita Upadhyaya Interview

Aneri Madhu

DePaul University, [Aanerimadhu@gmail.com](mailto:Aanerimadhu@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral\\_his\\_series](https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series)



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [Asian American Studies Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Madhu, Aneri. (2019) Udita Upadhyaya Interview.  
[https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral\\_his\\_series/119](https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/119)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Asian American Art Oral History Project at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian American Art Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@depaul.edu](mailto:digitalservices@depaul.edu).

**Interviewer: Aneri Madhu**

**Artist: Udita Upadhyaya**

**Location: Interview over Skype – Chicago, IL/Los Angeles, CA**

**Date: May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019**

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts & culture during the 2019 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Professor of Art, Media, & Design.*



Image taken from <https://www.uditaupadhyaya.com/more-info-about>

Bio courtesy of the artist

**Artist Bio:** Udita Upadhyaya is an interdisciplinary artist who uses the details of her medical, cultural, and social biography as her primary art material. Her work spans live art, devised theatre, performative photographs, sculpture, installation, video, writing, text, and fiber arts.

Upadhyaya delves into the privilege of being able to lose a language, to have a language to spare. She wonders which bodies have access to literacy? Which to expression? When? And Where? Upadhyaya writes in English, reconciling and reclaiming that her language of intellectual expression and subsequently of power is inherited from the colonizers of her ancestors. Simultaneously she works hard at re-teaching herself Hindi, text and script, slowly like a child she places a finger under every form, mouthing each syllable.

Most recently, Upadhyaya has performed and exhibited work at The Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago, University of Chicago's Smart Museum, Villa Teresa Decorative Arts Museum,

Links Hall, Weinberg/Newton Gallery, and a solo show, *nevernotmusic*, at Roman Susan Gallery, Chicago. Her artist book, *nevernotmusic*, has been acquired by Joan Flasch Artist's Book Collection, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, University of Chicago's Rare Book Collection, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago's Artist's Books Collection.

Upadhyaya was born in New Delhi in 1986, and currently lives and works between Mumbai, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

<https://www.uditaupadhyaya.com/>

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Aneri Madhu:** Tell me a little bit about yourself. Like, your birth date, where you grew up, where you went to school, when you came to the United States.

**Udita Upadhyaya:** I was born in New Delhi and grew up in Mumbai. I did my undergraduate studies at Boston University. I studied Film and International Relations. Then, I went back to India and did an MBA there and worked in the corporate world. That was a difficult experience for me because all I wanted to do is be an artist. After my MBA, I was working in advertising and I was working on the projects that I really didn't believe in. I had just had to set aside art, to conform to parental and cultural expectations. But the money in the bank did not fix my need for making, it did not satisfy me or make me happy. That is when I decided to apply to art school, and initially I kept it a secret. So, in secret, I started making art between 3 am and 6 am, usually, when everyone else in the house was asleep. That was how I rebuilt my creative practice. Then in 2014, I moved to the US to attend The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I have been here since, living between Chicago, Los Angeles, and Mumbai.

**AM:** When and how did you become an artist?

**UU:** I first found art in High School, at the Mahindra United World College of India. It was a wonderful moment for 16 year old me, I didn't even know that my psyche had these hidden stories, and that my art was trying to reveal them to me, and I have never exactly stopped seeing myself as an artist since then. I did have a hiatus from art, but I don't think I ever stopped applying my politics to my life. I just didn't have the luxury, then, to do this work all day every day. I am really grateful that now I get to be a working artist on my own terms, and apply more and more of myself to my practice.

**AM:** How would you define or categorize your art or yourself?

**UU:** I talk about myself as an interdisciplinary artist. I think a part of it is because my practice is sustained and excited by different modes of making. I'm always teaching myself something new. Casually I'll say "I do everything, some things I do better than other things, so I do them more often" and a huge part of that is that I keep teaching myself things to do. For example, next week, I'm working in Chicago on a project that is a music based performance and I actually find

music very scary, I am not trained it, and I have a relationship of grief with it. My grandmother was a musician, and since her death almost 20 years ago, that entire medium has been one of loss and grieving for me. But I keep pushing myself towards the new and scary. The piece, then, becomes about being scared of music or becomes about trying to learn music or heal as an adult. It's also about other things that I'm more experienced at working with. Like, language. And is something that is going to start happening to you if it hasn't already is, like, you will start missing your language. Is your mother-tongue Gujarati?

**AM:** Yes.

**UU:** You have people around you that you're talking to in Gujarati? When I moved here, I didn't have anyone that spoke to me in Hindi. I would just randomly talk to myself in Hindi and then I forgot how to read Hindi which was a huge loss, I mean, I know it but I'm reading it almost like I'm in school again, you know, with my hand and each finger and I think I'm not sure this is the case for Gujarati but with Hindi, at least nobody knows all the proper ways to speak it, like, when you read it in school or something, there is all of these words that you will never use in real life. Then the language itself is getting diluted because of a variety of reasons. So, that's what the piece is about. Those are things that I already study and make a lot of work about. And then, using a different medium of music and sort of singing, kind of, to get to the heart of that loss or need for connection. I mostly think of myself as interdisciplinary because I'm teaching myself new things or taking like it's sort of depends on the project what I'll do.

**AM:** What is the meaning of Vipassana Meditation?

**UU:** Vipassana meditation is supposed to be the way that Gautam Buddha achieved moksha. It was originated in the Indian subcontinent. Then, it was basically lost, like, that specific way to meditate was lost. And then Mr. Goenka (S. N. Goenka) found it again and he started setting up meditation centers all over India and now they're all over the world. It's a very simple kind of meditation. It is the kind of meditation that I learned when I was in India. I was just having a really hard time, I mean, I can joke about the MBA and corporate life etc. right now, but when it was happening, it was really hard. I started looking for ways to manage the difficulties of living a life you're not supposed to or you don't want to. And one of the things I found was Vipassana meditation which is similar to psychosomatic healing. And that is what kept me going and brought me back myself.

**AM:** What is psychosomatic healing?

**UU:** Psychosomatic healing has psycho, which is of the brain and somatic which is of the body. For example, someone says something really mean to you and your responses to that is something really physical, like, your stomach starts hurting or, like, I threw up because I was so shocked that this thing happened right. That is your body responding to a psychological event. Those are very extreme things that happened but there are more everyday things. Like, you had a fight with your mom yesterday or I had a fight with my mom yesterday and I didn't sleep that well. That's a smaller psychological thing and it still continues, playing out through in your body.

This for me is very connected to the practice of Vipassana. Vipassana is basically just asking you to sit with your body and the idea of ‘*Yeh Bhi Badal Jayega*’ meaning ‘*this too shall pass*’. If the experience is “I’m feeling really uncomfortable I’m feeling really uncomfortable I’m feeling really uncomfortable” you’re just invited to think...okay I’m going to just sit with it and notice how and where I’m feeling uncomfortable. I’m just literally doing it right now while talking to you. I’m feeling a little bit uncomfortable in my shoulder and my upper eye. It is weird. I’m like, did I do something wrong because my shoulder is just like always stressed out. I’m looking at it then I keep through my body, down to my stomach now and I think I’m hungry because my stomach feels like it’s a bit empty and then I go down to my hips and I’m on my knees I feel a little bit of just sensations. It’s not always like pain or anything. And I feel cold on my feet. And then you go back up and you start again. You do that like as a cycle over and over again. After a while, it is going to feel different. Basically, the thing is, all the feelings that are trapped in your body, all the things that are happening, they keep moving and changing if you let them. Now if I’m stressed and I’m in a position of stress or fear then my shoulder is going to stay locked up because I’m going to have either a freeze or a fight response but if I meditate, the point is, to let it go and let it move through.

One of the other ways to describe it is also like the jungle. If a lioness is trying to catch a deer, there’s a whole herd of deer and she has to catch only one. She’s going to catch one deer. Most of the herd runs away and there are two left over. And one of those two she catches. The other one is safe but he has to keep running. He keeps running, he keeps running, he’s not going to meet his herd, he’s going to get to safety and stop. When he stops, all of that stress and fear is in his body and what the animal will do like shake it off, like literally, shake it off. Humans, as a society, have decided that right now, while talking to you, I started shaking you’d be like what’s wrong with her. So we’ve decided to actually hold that impulse of trauma big or small trauma and not let ourselves shake it off. So it gets stuck in certain places. And Vipassana meditation is going back in and letting you release it. That’s kind of also what psychosomatic healing is after too. So, if you do that kind of meditation, pretty quickly you’ll start to feel tingling in your hands and legs or, like, you know, it’s a funny, like, it’s gone to sleep but, like, in weird parts of your body. Sometimes, I feel in my head so there is like a lot of release through that. And the ability to sit with difficult things more.

**AM:** Tell me about the meaning of your artwork *nevernotmusic*.

**UU:** As I was saying before, my grandmother was a musician and she died when I was like ten or twelve years old. My response to her death was to like stop listening to music because I was very close to her. I didn’t realize I was doing it till much later, where every time I would be in the presence of especially Hindustani classical music or dance I would just start spontaneously crying. I’d just sitting there wondering, what is wrong with me?, why am I crying? It is so weird. The reason I was doing that was because of similar trapped trauma but I had sort of spend a lot of time and energy running away from music my whole life.

And over the course of my time in Chicago, I met musicians and artists who were working with music and I was collaborating with them so I couldn’t keep running away as much as I wanted because I wanted to work with them and I wanted to do something with music or like I had to do something. And then I started realizing that there is actually music in everything because music

is just organization of sound. Even on this Skype call, that one sound that happens every few minutes, that is music to me. So I started realizing that this thing that I was trying to run away from was actually everywhere and I was not succeeding and running away from it.

With that project, I also was like I'm not the only one that has weird things of like crying and you know crying at musical things. Everyone has something and everyone needs you know, the idea of wanting to be held or the idea of cared. In 2016, November, my practice changed. I think that's true for a lot of people, I mean I remember the night of the election calling a friend and being really clear that our practices were going to change, like, I didn't know what was going to happen but something was going to change. And my practice was already pretty political but I think what ended up happening for me was actually that it became completely about care and nurturing and love and it became about like *I see you*. I think it ended up being about creating healing spaces and creating just more love in the world and I think it's still about that. It's only been a few years but it is becoming more and more about that.

So in *nevernotmusic*, I basically wrote twelve love letters to people I knew in Chicago and there were also letters for performance. The idea of a score is basically I'm writing a set of instructions that you can interpret and perform according to or sing according to or dance according to. But I wrote them as love letters. I wrote them as gifts to these specific people (and the audience/reader too).

The piece was sort of multi layered in that it was coming from a place of this very deep longing and missing of my grandmother for me and this very difficult time grieving. One of the reasons I'm really interested in the Vipassana is because culturally and specifically my family doesn't like to feel any feelings. They are very logical. And I was always the kid that wanted to feel them and then they didn't know what to do because nobody was showing me how to feel feelings. Like after my grandma died it was just like okay this happened, she went peacefully, this is life, and that was that and that wasn't enough for me. I was like well I understand and it and I'm still upset and now twenty years later I'm still upset. Nobody else talks about it. So it was a way to figure out grieving by letting myself grief but also letting other people be seen, and letting them grieve too.

**AM:** I really like you artwork. It is very good.

**UU:** I am glad that you like it.

[Both laughs]

**AM:** In one of your interview, Marya Spont-Lemus states that there's the title, and there's also the title the way that it's written, which is that "nevernotmusic" does not have spaces between the words. What do you think about this?

**UU:** I think it's like the way grief is. I don't actually listen to music that often because I start missing my grandmother like I would literally just be like why am I missing her and now talking about her just in this conversation I'm like okay, I feel quite sad right now out of nowhere like I wasn't feeling sad when I was talking about like the MBA or when we were discussing

Bollywood movies and now I'm like oh this hurts this is not easy and it kind of has to do with like you can't really breathe when grief comes. In my case, it doesn't feel like a good thing that music won't leave you alone. You know it's almost a bad thing. But it's also a transformative thing. It's like a bad thing that will turn into something good because it will turn into healing and that similar with you know attending to grief as I supposed to pretending that everything is okay. So, that is why I didn't want to put the spaces in, I wanted it to feel like one laborious breath.

**AM:** Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork?

**UU:** It's hard to answer that question as like a yes or no. I think because my identity in this country is still evolving and I guess the allegiance in my life is also still evolving. I mean I'm obviously Asian. I'm not Asian American. I think my work is very much about being a Non Resident Alien, here in USA in 2019. I talk about the uncertainty of being able to be here, the confusion around choosing here and when it doesn't feel like a choice and the questions around not belonging in either place. I don't have the experience of having grown up here. So there are a lot of very interesting privileges of that. I always like I actually do have a country that would technically take me back if something bad happens here, or if I just wanted to go back. It's not just that I have no countries but also that I have two countries. The reason I'm not Asian American because I'm not American. And I had not experienced America till I was a grown up an older teenager. I didn't really know I was brown till I moved here.

**AM:** Me neither.

**UU:** Yeah... Suddenly I was like what does that even mean? So somebody I know who's actually a therapist said, this thing that when immigrants move here as adults they realize and it hits them over and over again that they are people of color because they don't grow up feeling like people of color. So it literally feels like a punch over and over and over again. And I still very much feel like I'm in that stage of not being able to wrap my head around it. I feel like I'm hyper aware that I don't actually believe this. So I am fighting it from a different angle and I know that other people that don't believe it because to begin with it's not a real thing. We are not good or bad or whatever based on the color of our skin or the paper that proves where we were born. But I think I am still very much feeling like I'm wrapping my head around it. I feel more like a pull to be like I am an Indian artists working in the US. I'm just sort of all over the place. I have spoken to other people who also grew up in India and came here for school and are still here. And we kind of talk about like, when am I going to show my art in India like is my art even relevant in India. There is a lot of that fracture. So it is hard to say yes or no to that question although like the easy answer is yes obviously and the more complicated answer is like there's a different sub section of Non Resident Alien or something.

**AM:** Have you ever been included in an exhibition that was contextualized as Asian or Asian American or have you ever been labeled as an "Asian" or "Asian American artist"?

**UU:** [Laughs] I've been in a couple of shows that were Indian like there's a really good organization. It's called S.A.W.C.C. South Asian Women's Creative Collective. It's in New York. I've done one show with them which was then two different pieces and shown a couple of times.

I don't think that I get labeled Asian. I think it's pretty much like Indian. I don't necessarily feel like I get clubbed into Asian American as easily as other things. Which I am not happy about but it's okay. I mean it's complicated how the rest of the world sees Asia.

**AM:** What type of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

**UU:** I don't know. That is hard question.

**AM:** Yeah...It is kind of hard to answer.

**UU:** It feels like it was always the same.

**AM:** What are you currently working on?

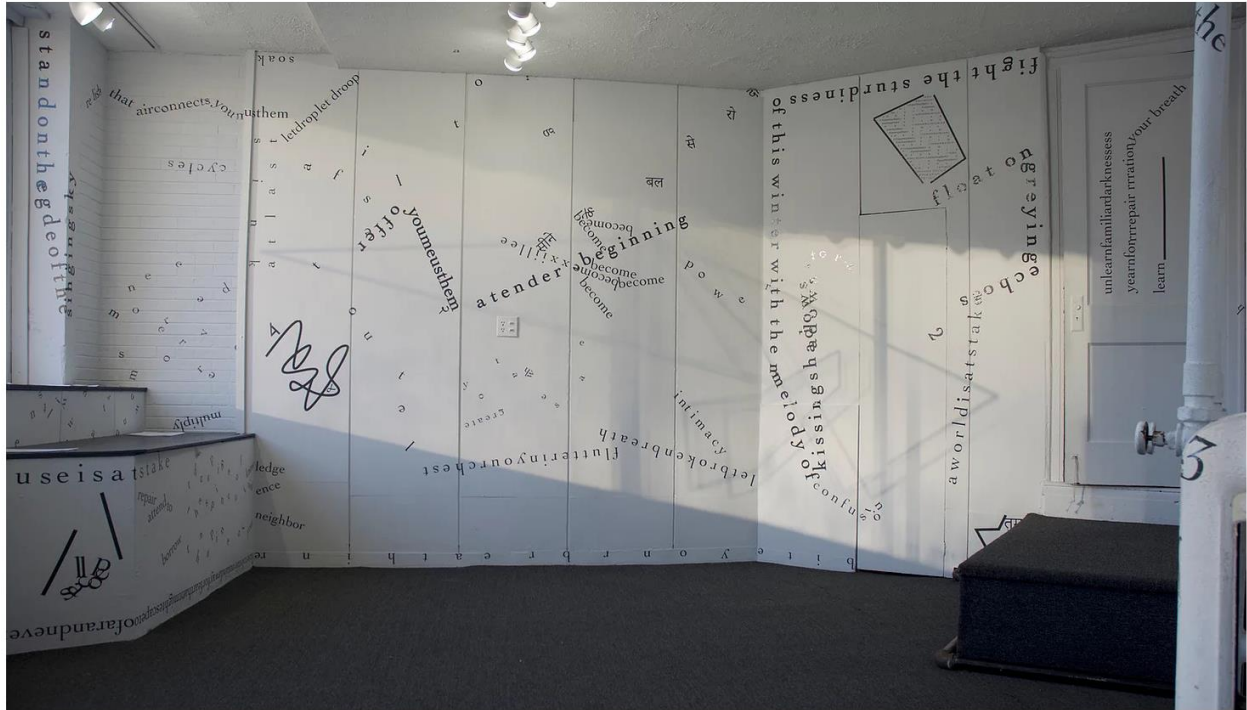
**UU:** I'm working on the project later this month at University of Chicago's Smart Museum, River Tributary \_\_\_\_\_. It is Chapter 2 of a devised performance work. Chapter 1 was last year, at Weinberg Newton Gallery. For this one, I am conducting workshops, and meetings with selected students at U Chicago, and considering how we long for language and community and connection. I am also working with composer Molly Jones to add music to the work. We are thinking of the idea of relationships and homebuilding in a new country, and grief and grieving as we try to find safety.

**AM:** Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

**UU:** Thank you.

**End.**





## Installation View

nevernotmusic, a solo show at Roman Susan Gallery, Chicago, IL



## Installation View

nevernotmusic, a solo show at Roman Susan Gallery, Chicago, IL



**Gallery Window from Outside At Night**

nevernotmusic, a solo show at Roman Susan Gallery, Chicago, IL



**Installation View: Ceiling Detail**

nevernotmusic, a solo show at Roman Susan Gallery, Chicago, IL





**Installation View**

nevernotmusic, a solo show at Roman Susan Gallery, Chicago, IL